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**THE NEWS MEDIA PRISM:**  
**SHAPING AMERICA'S**  
**OPINION OF CONGRESS**

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*"[T]he media and democracy seemed to have become productively intertwined, a modern, open marriage of free access between the information marketplace the political arena. "*<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL JANE WAY

## INTRODUCTION

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century begins, the relationship between the American public and Congress is as troubled as ever. The public harbors a great deal of cynicism; they question the integrity and effectiveness of members of Congress. While this distrust is not new, the level of cynicism appears to be at an all-time high. The result is a society that is woefully disengaged from its government, leading to an uninformed and apathetic electorate.

Why has America become so cynical? A central player in this drama is the press; they are the prism through which the public gleans much of its knowledge of the political process. Accordingly, the tone of media coverage has a remarkable impact as people form their opinions about our federal legislature. The relationship between the press and Congress is contentious; therefore, coverage of activities on Capitol Hill is often negative. This paper explores the history of this multifaceted relationship through examination of congressional press coverage since World War II. It will further explore the role the news media play in the increasing estrangement between Congress and the public.

The news media have undergone significant changes, especially during the 20th century. Increased corporate ownership has altered the motivations of news media owners, who must delicately balance responsible journalism with a business model that demands unusually high profit margins.

Another significant change is the speed of the information superhighway. With the proliferation of cable news channels and Internet news sites, the American public is bombarded

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Janeway, *Republic of Denial: Press, Politics, and Public Life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 3.

with news, news and more news -- some reliable, some not. As the pace of news coverage becomes more frenetic, the American attention span appears to be getting shorter and shorter. This paper explores how the media have adapted to please an easily distracted and increasingly fickle audience.

The downside of this fast-paced news environment is that serious, analytical coverage of the political process has diminished significantly. News media companies, beholden to their shareholders, push profit margins by giving the public what it wants, i.e., "infotainment." Furthermore, many complain the modern press devotes an inordinate amount of coverage to scandal and conflict; but this paper will demonstrate that this phenomenon can be traced to the "yellow journalism" of the early 1900s. The deliberative pace of the legislative process just isn't fast (or interesting) enough to capture the American audience. Therefore, coverage focuses on the peccadilloes of Congressmen and invective hurled from one side of the aisle to the other. Unfortunately, the predilection to cover scandal and controversy has bled into the world of politics. News organizations are inclined to cover stories portraying Congress as a collection of combative louts whose sole purpose is to get reelected. This arguably lowers the public's already low opinion of Congress and the political process in general. This paper examines how, over time, public opinion of the Congress has been in lockstep with the tenor of press coverage: when coverage is particularly harsh, as it has been since the 1990s, approval ratings of Congress nosedive.

Finally, this paper touches upon the American public's remarkable disengagement from the political process. This increasing level of apathy has led to an uninformed electorate and dismal voter turnout. Members of Congress have noticed; polls show that many members of

Congress feel the American public doesn't know enough to make informed decisions. In short, there is mistrust and cynicism all around.

Journalist Jonathan Schell described the estrangement of the public from both the news media and the political process:

On one side is the America of those who are political professionals. It comprises politicians, their advisers and employees, and the news media. Politicians waste little love on the newsmen who cover them, and the newsmen display a surly skepticism towards politicians as a badge of honor. Yet if the voters I met on the campaign trail are any indication (and poll data suggests they are), much of the public has lumped newsmen and politicians into a single class, which, increasingly, it despises. Respect for the government and respect for the news media have declined in tandem. More and more the two appear to the public to be an undifferentiated establishment - a new Leviathan - composed of rich, famous, powerful people who are divorced from the lives of ordinary people and indifferent to their concerns. On the other side of the division is the America of political amateurs: ordinary voters.<sup>2</sup>

#### **THE NEWS MEDIA: YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

*"For most folks, no news is good news; for the press, good news is not news.*  
**GLORIA BORGER**

The news media have a long history. Julius Caesar ordered the *Acta Diurna* (Daily Events) to be posted each day throughout Rome, starting in 59~ BC, to inform citizens of the daily activities in the Roman Senate. Johannes Gutenberg designed a press capable of mass-production and published the first official newspaper around 1502. In the American colonies, the first newspaper was published in 1690. The *News-Letter*, proclaimed it was "for the Publick Good, to give a true Account of All Foreign & Domestick Occurrences, and to prevent a great many false reports of the same."<sup>3</sup> In addition to reporting these "foreign and domestick occurrences," newspapers were largely used by colonial merchants to advertise their wares.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Schell, "The Uncertain Leviathan," *Atlantic*, 278, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Berner, "The Process of Writing News," Penn State University, URL: [http://www.courses.psu.edu/Materials/COMM461\\_bx2/writl.htm](http://www.courses.psu.edu/Materials/COMM461_bx2/writl.htm).

With the 19th century came the rise of powerful political parties, who largely ran newspapers as an extension of their politics. This lasted until the 1930s, when a shift to private ownership and factual news reporting took precedence over opinion-driven columns.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought spectacular technological growth for the news media. The advent of the telegraph allowed battlefield correspondents to send stories to their editors during the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> With industrialization came investigative journalism. Reporters uncovered stories of appalling conditions in sweatshops and the corruption of public officials. This activist journalism, dubbed "muckraking" by President Theodore Roosevelt, led to extensive reforms, including Roosevelt's trust-busting and an amendment to the Constitution allowing direct election of the Senate. As publishers aimed to satisfy the needs of a more egalitarian, democratic and middle class society, readership of newspapers and magazines increased dramatically. When advertising became an integral part of newspapers (and other media in the future), a true mass market was born.

After World War I, magazines such as *Time* became a popular source of news and entertainment. Radio increased in popularity, allowing Americans to sit in their living rooms and listen to the President of the United States for the first time. Radio stations hired reporters, such as Edward R. Murrow, to broadcast live to the U.S. while the Germans bombed London. Murrow's transition to television brought about the development of the nightly newscasts we see today.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout time, the press, the public, and politics have been inextricably linked. The Founding Fathers, in carefully constructing a "noble experiment" in self-government, recognized

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Downie and Robert Kaiser, *The News about the News: American Journalism in Peril* (New York: Knopf, 2002) 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.129.

that democracy could not truly exist without a free press. Thomas Jefferson said, "If it were left to me to decide whether we should have a government without a free press or a free press without a government, I would prefer the latter."<sup>7</sup> The British Parliamentarian Edmund Burke recognized the power of the press in the early nineteenth century when he recognized the three estates in Parliament: the Commons, the Lords, and the Sovereign, then pointed to the press gallery and said, "There sits a fourth estate more important than them all."<sup>8</sup> Even Napoleon Bonaparte recognized the power of the press: "A journalist is a grumbler, a censurer, a giver of advice, a regent of sovereigns, a tutor of nations. Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets."<sup>9</sup> Today, the label "fourth estate" still applies; many see the press as an unofficial branch of government, alongside the Executive, Legislative and Judicial.

At various times, the news media have taken it upon themselves to examine their role in society. In 1947, the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press found that freedom of the press was in danger due to three factors: 1) control of the press had fallen into fewer hands, 2) those hands failed to meet the needs of the people, and 3) press practices were, at times, out of control and irresponsible. The Commission urged the industry to accept its responsibility in serving the public interest in a lamentation eerily familiar to today's observer: "The press emphasizes the exceptional rather than the representative; the sensational rather than the significant. The press is preoccupied with these incidents to such an extent that the citizen is not supplied the information and discussion he needs to discharge his responsibilities to the community."<sup>10</sup> The report further stated, "[O]nly a responsible press can remain free . . . If

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<sup>7</sup> "Issues of Democracy," *Electronic Journal of the U.S. Information Agency*, Vol. 2, Number 1, February 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Burke's discussion of "the fourth estate" was based on his observations of the French revolution and Louis XVI's designation of nobles, clergy and commoners as the first three estates.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Abstract of the Report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, April 1947, *Nieman Reports*, Winter 1999-Spring 2000, p. 9.

these giant agencies of communication are irresponsible, not even the First Amendment will protect their freedom from government control. The Amendment will be amended."<sup>11</sup> The Commission outlined five recommendations that have become the driving forces behind today's news media:

- A truthful, intelligent account of the day's events with analysis to its context;
- A forum to exchange comments and criticisms;
- A way to protect group opinions and attitudes to one another;
- A way to present and clarify goods and values of society;
- A way to reach all members of society.<sup>12</sup>

Today's media face the same challenges faced in 1947, particularly in the area of too much power in the hands of too few. For example, the family-owned newspapers of the early twentieth century have become parts of publicly owned media behemoths intent upon maximizing profits for shareholders. In early 2000, the Tribune Company (publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*) took over the Times Mirror Company, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsday* and other respected newspapers. This mega-merger cost the Tribune Company \$8 billion and made it one of the most powerful media companies in the U.S., with 23 broadcast television stations, a cable television station, a radio station, a magazine, online publications, and even a baseball team.<sup>13</sup> Another corporate giant, Gannett, controls 134 papers worldwide and 20 broadcast television stations. Knight Ridder publishes 35 daily newspapers and 18 suburban newspapers. Among them, these three chains publish a quarter of all daily newspapers circulated in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Gene Robert and Robert Kunkel, "Leaving Readers Behind," *American Journalism Review*, May 2001.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

The same intense consolidation is taking place in the radio and broadcast industries. Before Congress passed a law in 1996 repealing the restriction on how many radio stations owners had in a single market, the most stations owned by a single company was 65. Since then, corporate giant Clear Channel Communications acquired over 1,225 local radio stations, approximately 970 more than its closest competitor. Large corporations such as Disney, AOL-Time Warner, General Electric, Viacom and News Corporation own the six major networks on television; and seven companies dominate the cable industry, controlling 75 percent of the nationwide market.<sup>15</sup>

This "corporate media" has led to concerns regarding the quality of news. Mega-mergers have resulted in slashed newsroom budgets, resulting in less coverage of important stories and events. According to the Consumer Federation of America, the number of news outlets has increased significantly since 1977, yet the number of newsrooms has shrunk by 15 percent.<sup>16</sup>

Consolidation within the industry has often led to a clash between business goals and journalistic goals. Many within and outside the industry complain they are forced to compromise their journalistic integrity in deference to the "bottom line." Furthermore, many question whether the media can act as "corporate watchdogs" after they have been swallowed up by companies such as General Electric or AOL-Time Warner. Will they be permitted to critically and objectively report news about their parent corporations? William Hachten cites the example of a telephone call from Jack Welch, chairman of General Electric (owner of NBC) to Lawrence Grossman, then head of NBC news, instructing him not to use words in NBC news reports that might adversely affect GE stock.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: The New Press) p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Camille Taiara, "Meet the New Press: Corporate Media are Spending Big Money in DC, So it Can Give You Less News. And it's Found a Very Good Friend in Chairman Michael Powell," *San Francisco Bay Gate*, January 2003.

Over time, a duality of purpose evolved within the news media: to report the facts and to be a watchdog against corruption. The news media usually operates in one of three modes: 1) routine, normal news not dominated by any one story; 2) a story of major significance breaks and dominates news coverage, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th; and 3) a scandal or sensation story dominates the news, such as the O.J. Simpson trial or revelations about Monica Lewinsky.<sup>17</sup>

Coverage during times of national crisis has generally been acknowledged as first rate; however, most Americans see today's norm as sensational coverage of scandals. But who's to blame? "I don't think you can say that the press has an intensive interest in things that titillate," observed former Senator Warren Rudman (R-NH). "I think that what you have to say is that the public has an excessive interest in things that titillate. Therefore, the press feels compelled to cover them."<sup>18</sup>

This predilection for covering scandal has long roots in our media culture. Circulation wars between two media giants, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, led to lurid, scandal-centered news coverage that became known as yellow journalism. Hearst's definition of news was "[a] story whose headline causes a reader to first stagger back in disbelief and then rush to buy a paper and read all the shocking details."<sup>19</sup> Both Hearst and Pulitzer, along with E.W. Scripps, covered social and political issues in order to appeal to new segments of the American public: the growing middle class and a quickly-growing population of immigrants. Their crusades on behalf of "the underdog" won them loyal readers. Hearst went further and pushed his political views in his publications, including his opposition to World War I. Tabloid

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<sup>17</sup> William Hachten, *The Troubles of Journalism* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), p. xxv.

<sup>18</sup> Povich, Elaine, *Partners & Adversaries: The Contentious Connection Between Congress and the Media* (Arlington, VA: The Freedom Forum, 1996) p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Hachten p. xxi.

journalism also got an early start in the United States. The most successful, *The New York Daily News*, was launched in 1919 and had a circulation of two million by the start of World War II. The *Daily News* and its competitors covered lurid stories of entertainment personalities and went so far as to introduce the concept of faked photos, i.e., "composographs."<sup>20</sup> Tabloid journalism didn't stop with the tabloids; gossip columns were becoming the rage in reputable newspapers, with coverage by such famous columnists as Walter Winchell, Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons. Although the public claimed to be disgusted, its appetite for gossip and scandal was insatiable ... and remains so today. The Internet-based *Drudge Report* first broke the story of President Clinton's dalliances with the intern Monica Lewinsky after a reputable news magazine sat on the sidelines awaiting confirmation of information from the office of the Independent Counsel. The major news networks picked up the ball and ran with it, ensuring that Americans received every lurid detail. Rush Limbaugh proceeded to read the *Drudge Report* aloud to his listeners. In the interest of getting the "scoop," reputable news organizations have quickly aired speculative information before ensuring its accuracy. In fact, a 1999 study of news coverage of the Lewinsky scandal found that 41 percent of reporting was not factual; rather, it was journalists offering their own opinions or analysis. An additional 12 percent was not original reporting, but attributed to other sources.<sup>21</sup>

This "tabloidization" of the news isn't limited to the print media. As more Americans turn to television, networks have created a proliferation of "news magazines," such as "20/20" and "Dateline." David Shaw, press critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, observed:

Twenty years ago, there were essentially seven gatekeepers in the American news business - executive editors of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, executive producers or anchors of the CBS, NBC, and ABC evening news shows, and editors of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Occasionally,

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44-50.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

someone else - "60 Minutes," *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times* or the *New Yorker* - would break a big story that would force everyone to take notice. If a story didn't make it past one of these, it didn't fly and often the *New York Times* editor was the key one. Now all of that has changed. Well, almost all. Now the *New York Times* and the other six no longer decide. There are dozens of gatekeepers or none at all. Today, there is a weekly network magazine show on every night - "60 Minutes," "Day One," "Turning Point," "Dateline," etc., plus syndicated magazine shows like "Inside Edition," "Hard Copy," "A Current Affair." "American Journal" are each on every night. That's a vast maw craving information, "infotainment," around the clock. Add to this CNN with its big appetite and once a CNN story comes on at any time, everyone scrambles for it. Once a story like the Clinton/Gennifer Flowers story gets on, it takes on a life of its own and<sup>22</sup> the media succumb to it. The big seven cannot resist the pressure not to use it.

Broadcast news organizations, in the pursuit of ratings and revenue, have fallen prey to the temptation for scandal. For example, in covering both the criminal and civil trials of O.J. Simpson, ABC, CBS and NBC devoted more than 46 hours of their weeknight newscasts to the story.<sup>23</sup> On the cable news networks, the pressure to fill 24 hours and the drive for ratings has led to stories with dubious sources or facts that have not been thoroughly checked, undermining the public's trust in the press.

The CNN "Tailwind" debacle serves as a cautionary tale for what can go wrong. On June 7, 1998, CNN aired an investigative report titled, "Valley of Death," claiming that US forces in Vietnam dropped sarin gas on an enemy base camp, killing 100 people, including American defectors. As soon as the report aired, the Pentagon vehemently denied using the nerve gas in Vietnam. CNN hired respected first amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams to conduct an independent investigation. Abrams found that CNN aired "accusations of the gravest sort without sufficient justification and in the face of substantial persuasive information to the contrary. CNN should retract the broadcast and apologize to the public and, in particular, the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83-84.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

participants in Operation Tailwind."<sup>24</sup> As a result, CNN retracted the story, issued an apology, and fired the show's two producers, April Oliver and Jack Smith.

The story served to confirm the public's already waning faith in the news media. When *Newsweek* conducted a poll, 61 percent of respondents said they knew of the Tailwind story. Fifty-three percent said they believed news reporting was "often inaccurate," and 76 percent said the news media was too driven by entertainment than by traditional reporting.<sup>25</sup>

### **THE MEDIA AND CONGRESS**

*"The only way for a newsman to look on a politician is down."*<sup>42</sup>  
**H.L. MENCKEN**

In the quest for higher ratings and increased circulation, the news media have traditionally shunned stories that explore the nature of what our legislature does: make law. Stories of the legislative process or the institution in general are eschewed for stories involving conflict or scandal in either government or the personal lives of those serving in government. This highly cynical coverage has dramatically increased in the last decade, with scandal and conflict being the typical mode of operation. The relationship between Congress and the media is often contentious. Each group eyes the other with suspicion and, sometimes, with downright hostility. A 1995 Roper poll conducted for the Freedom Forum found that 94 percent of Republican and 76 percent of Democratic Congressmen polled felt they had been "burned" by a bad or false story.<sup>26</sup>

A 1996 study conducted by Mark Rozell found that the news media have treated Congress with greater and more negative scrutiny and even outright contempt over the last 57 years. Conducting a comprehensive review of three weekly news magazines (*US. News and*

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<sup>24</sup> Neil Hickey, "Ten Mistakes That Led to the Great CNN/Time Fiasco," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Volume 37, Issue 3, September/October 1998, pp. 26-29.

<sup>25</sup> Evan Thomas and Gregory Vistica, "Fallout from a Media Fiasco," *Newsweek*, July 20, 1998, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Povich, p. 49.

*World Report, Newsweek* and *Time*) and three daily newspapers (*New York Times, Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*) Rozell divides his study into three periods: the Era of Neglect, the Era of Discovery, the Era of Cynicism.

The Era of Neglect (1946 - early 1960s): Press coverage of the Congress was generally objective after World War II, lacking the cynicism seen today. Furthermore, the news media covered very little scandal. The public largely viewed Congress as an impediment to progress and subservient to a strong president.

A change in the political system occurred just after World War II, reflecting a changing society. It was a period of unparalleled optimism in America. Americans trusted the press and the government during a time when the government brought them the GI Bill, job security, minimum wage, health care and other social programs. A growing middle class led to voters less attuned to the political party machines that had dominated politics in the past. Instead, voters were more inclined to listen to what a particular candidate offered. Furthermore, the American government's responsibilities had never been greater. Not only did it need to help rebuild the economies in war-torn Europe and Asia, it also needed to gather public support for the rebuilding of its own economy and social structure. "The need for the press to assist in public education about those awesome new national responsibilities had never been more urgent."<sup>27</sup>

Many relied upon the new medium of television to gather information on candidates running for national office. In the late 1950s, the Democratic-led Congress under President Eisenhower "passed federal aid to education bills, legislation to build hospitals, clear slums, and construct modern housing for working and middle class families, support farm prices, build

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<sup>27</sup> Janeway, p. 22.

public power systems, lay out a modern national highway system, fund research into dread diseases."<sup>28</sup>

Three important events took place during this time that drew the scrutiny of the press.

First, the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, which included the following reforms:

- Reduction in the number of standing committees
  - Standing committees to maintain records of hearings
- Opening of committee hearings to the public (except executive mark-up sessions)
- Creation of a Joint Budget Committee to prepare the legislative budget
- Limited categories for introduction of private bills, reducing the workload
- Increase staff of standing committees
  - A congressional pay raise of 25 percent
- Required lobbyists to register and report expenditures

Provisions not included in the final legislation included language abolishing the seniority system for selection of committee chairmen, curtailing the power of the House Rules Committee<sup>9</sup> and more easily limiting debate in the Senate.<sup>2</sup>

Although coverage was far from extensive, the press responded favorably to the legislation; an editorial in the *New York~Times* went so far as to commend the pay raise, which would attract "the kind of men and women we want to attract to that office. ... Congress members should now be able to do their jobs more creditably, and, having less anxiety over their personal pocketbooks, can confine their attention more fully to the essential business of making the nation's laws."<sup>30</sup> The *Washington Post* went on to say:

Congratulations are due of Congress for streamlining its creaking and groaning machinery. It is ... a miracle that such a seven-league step has been taken in the reorganization of Congress. All through the war Congress refused to follow the lead of the country and undergo reconversion in the interest of efficient

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Rozell, Mark, *In Contempt of Congress: Postwar Press Coverage on Capitol Hill* (Westport: Praeger, 1996), p.12.  
<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

operation. . . . With the valiant generalship of Senator LaFollette and Representative Monroney, they have helped to make the Seventy-ninth Congress memorable, and in the future there should be fewer of those snarls in Congress which have recently been productive of jeremiads about the imminence of a constitutional crisis.

The 1950s brought the media spotlight on the congressional investigations into communist infiltration of the federal government and organized crime. The nation's media covered the 1951 Senate Crime Investigation Committee hearings on organized crime favorably, although some felt the hearings were just for "show" and would have no measurable impact in the fight against organized crime. The nation's attention was riveted, however, to radio and television broadcasts of the hearings; retailers complained of slow sales due to a buying public's staying home to watch or listen to the proceedings.

When Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) began making allegations of a communist presence in the federal government, many in the editorial offices of the major newspapers sat on the sidelines, giving McCarthy an outlet for his demagoguery. Coverage of McCarthy's activities was, at best, chillingly neutral. McCarthy was an expert at using the press to further his agenda and manipulate public opinion, leaking information at the right points of the deadline cycle to have the most effect. The wire services, which were an important source of information, took McCarthy's words at face value and sent them along to press rooms with little interpretation or judgment. Looking back, many in the press, including William Theis of the International News Service, have been highly critical of the lack of critical reporting during the McCarthy era. Said Theis: "We let Joe [McCarthy] get away with murder, reporting it as he said it, not doing the kind of critical analysis we'd do today. All three wire services were so God damned

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

objective that McCarthy got away with everything, bamboozling the editors and the public. It was a sad period in American journalism."<sup>32</sup>

News organizations learned from the McCarthy experience. According to Mark Rozell, reportorial techniques went from being primarily a presentation of the facts to more in-depth analysis and commentary. This critical analysis contributed to the society's pursuit of civil rights. When the 85th Congress reached a deadlock in the deliberation of a far-reaching civil rights bill, editorial pages continually dogged members to take action. The opposition of Southern members to certain provisions of the legislation, namely the provision allowing federal judges to issue injunctions in instances of voting-rights abuses, led to the threat of a filibuster in the Senate. The *Washington Post* called public attention to the matter, urging action because "the eyes of the world [were] upon [the Congress], and denying blacks their right to vote `would be a blow to the whole free world.'<sup>33</sup> After some compromise, a landmark civil rights bill was enacted. Many in the press saw the victory as a sign of Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson's strong leadership.

The Era of Discovery (1965 - mid-1970s): The pace of social change didn't slow in the 1960s; it accelerated. Mark Rozell lists three watershed moments in the relationship between Congress and the media: the legislative activism of the 89th Congress in bringing about the "Great Society," legislative reforms in 1968 and 1970, and the groundbreaking investigative journalism of the Watergate scandal in 1973.<sup>34</sup>

The political activism of the 89th Congress was highly praised by the press. With a landslide victory and a substantial Democratic majority in both the House and the Senate, President Johnson was able to legislate his Great Society. The press gave extensive coverage to

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<sup>32</sup> Janeway, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Rozell, pp. 18-19.

<sup>34</sup> *bid.*, pp. 25-52.

legislation covering civil rights, education, and Medicare. The *New York Times* called the 89th "the best Congress since World War II"<sup>35</sup> and observed, "Now that Congress has begun to act as a creative partner with the Executive branch in the legislative enterprise, rather than merely a critic, obstructionist and irritant, there are few discernible limits to what it can achieve for the common good."<sup>36</sup>

The press didn't have as many kind words for the self-reform of the Congress in 1968. After numerous instances of unethical conduct by its members, Congress adopted a series of ethics guidelines to prevent future violations. These included limits on honoraria, prohibition on personal use of campaign funds, disclosure of gifts of more than \$50, and financial disclosure rules requiring members to file reports with either the U.S. Comptroller General (Senate) or the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct (House). The press decried the reform as superficial and lamented the lack of full and public financial disclosure for members of Congress. The *New York Times* editorial staff called the Senate Code of Ethics a "most unsatisfactory document, pretentious in aim and pathetic in fulfillment. . . In short, the committee came up with the kind of ethical code that a corrupt man could easily live by - presuming he had intelligence and a little tact."<sup>37</sup>

The Legislative Reform Act of 1970 brought profound changes to the legislative process. Committee roll call votes were made public; anonymous voting in the House was abolished, as were unrecorded votes; and committee rules were put in writing to preclude committee chairmen from having too much power. The Senate adopted numerous reforms to the committee system. Members of the minority party were permitted to call witnesses in hearings or call meetings in the event the chairman refused to do so. Members were limited to chairing one committee and

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

could only serve on two major committees, but not two of the most powerful - Armed Services, Appropriations, Finance or Foreign Relations.

The press welcomed the reform but, true to form, felt it wasn't far-reaching enough, especially the failure to address the issue of seniority in committee assignments. An editorial in the *Washington Post* colored the reform as inadequate:

Unfortunately, the House knocked out a provision requiring all committee meetings to be open to the public unless closed by majority vote.... Congress should not be allowed to forget that the major sources of its inefficiency and loss of public confidence remain untouched. Nothing in the bill would alter the elevation of misfits into key positions through the seniority system. Nor did the House take advantage of the occasion to give its leadership power to make and carry out an agenda. . . . So the great tasks of congressional reform still lie ahead.<sup>38</sup>

The media adopted the watchdog role during the Watergate scandal, when the term "adversarial journalism" took on new meaning. Members of the press were united in their support for Congress' role uncovering the facts surrounding White House misdeeds. Others saw congressional involvement differently. Not surprisingly, the office of the President complained, and the Special Prosecutor, Archibald Cox, worried that the hearings might prejudice the legal process. The *Washington Post*, however, defended the Senate hearings as a way to "help the nation get through the crisis."<sup>39</sup>

Over the next two years, the Nixon White House attempted to sway public opinion by criticizing Congress for "wallowing" in the Watergate issue. The press responded with encouragement for Congress to continue in its search for the truth:

[The] Senate Watergate Committee had acted in the public interest by resisting political pressure to call off its hearings, or to close them to coverage by press and television.... Far from exposing the United States to criticism and ridicule, full public scrutiny of grievous violations of the public trust is reassuring

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> *bid.*, p. 39.

to those, here and abroad, who cling to belief in the continued validity of government by the people.<sup>40</sup>

The press further praised Congress when the House began a formal impeachment inquiry in October 1973. They also applauded when the House voted 410-4 to support an impeachment inquiry.

Although press coverage of congressional Watergate activities was favorable, public opinion departed from that of the nation's editorial pages. Public opinion of the Congress was at an all-time low, even lower than President Nixon's.<sup>41</sup> A possible explanation is the public's disgust with the whole political process, lumping the Executive branch with the Legislative branch. Furthermore, the public has a notoriously short attention span, and the Watergate affair dragged on for almost two years.

Other activities during the Era of Discovery included passage of the War Powers Act; some campaign finance reform; and legislation on energy, education and pension-fund standards. *Time* praised Congress' performance: "Even allowing for the members' preoccupation with Nixon and Watergate for much of its tenure, the 93rd Congress amassed a respectable record and left behind durable achievements."<sup>42</sup>

The sixties may have been a period of relative peace between the press and the Congress, but for the press and the public it was a time of tremendous upheaval and vast social change. Race riots, sexual equality (and with it the sexual revolution), expanded civil rights, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the Vietnam War, Watergate; these events woke a society that had largely lived in idyllic times since World War II. The press played a powerful role in documenting these changes, and in many cases, instigating them.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

In 1963, 92 percent of American homes had televisions, compared to 55 percent a decade earlier.<sup>43</sup> Television enabled the public to see footage of President Kennedy being killed in 1963; it brought the war in Vietnam into American living rooms in the mid-1960s to early 1970s. A new level of social unrest was televised as protests against the war escalated into violent confrontations at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and at Kent State University in 1970. Violence became routine viewing in America's living rooms, with daily stories about crime, gang violence and prison uprisings. Broadcast news organizations responded in September 1963 by changing the format of their evening newscasts from having a 15-minute "talking head" to a 30-minute show with film clips and commentary.<sup>44</sup> The press began to publicly challenge military policy decisions, increasing public opposition to the war as national will waned.

The Era of Cynicism (1977 - present): The upheaval of the 1960s ended the public's largely unquestioning support for the American government and its policies. Press coverage was hypercritical of Congress' performance and contained a high degree of cynicism and, sometimes, downright hostility. Public opinion followed suit, with approval ratings of the Congress generally very low.

After President Carter assumed office in 1977, the press expressed high hopes that there would be Johnson-like cooperation between Congress and the White House. *US. News & World Report* gushed, "For the first time since the mid-1960s, a large degree of harmony between Congress and the White House is in the cards for the new year. The heavy atmosphere of stalemate that has hung over Washington since 1969 is lifting, now that Democrats once again are to be in command at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.... A new spirit of cooperation

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<sup>43</sup> Janeway, p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

seems guaranteed."<sup>45</sup> By the end of the year, however, the honeymoon period was over; the press blamed the President, but also labeled Congressional leadership as uncooperative. During the Reagan Administration, the press was highly critical of House Democrats for failing to present a successful opposition to the President's economic program, which sailed through the Senate under the leadership of the Republicans. The *New York Times* asked, "Why has Congress gone along so limply? Because the president is thought to be hugely popular and few politicians want to cross him."<sup>46</sup> Journalists looked to the White House for leadership in Washington and considered Congress to be a "maze of vested interests and power centers, each with its own motives, and priorities." Members of Congress supported budget cuts in theory but "howl when their own programs get axed." Particularly harsh criticism came from David Broder in 1981: Show a little pity for Senator Spender and Congressman Contracts.... This Congress has been a horror show for them.... Not one new program, not one new agency, not one rotten little pilot project they can pin on the wall and send out a press release to brag about."<sup>47</sup>

The Iran-Contra hearings in 1987 provided another opportunity for the press to criticize Congress, unlike the praise they received during Watergate. Conservative journalists complained that Congress had no business meddling in the President's foreign policymaking. In a February 1987 editorial, the *Wall Street Journal* chastised Congress: "The core of this country's difficulties in foreign policy is that many members of the Washington community have adopted the quite radical position that Congress not only has powers to debate and fund foreign policy but is entitled to engage itself directly in policy execution. That is a prescription for paralysis." Mary McGrory of the *Post* put it more bluntly:

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<sup>45</sup> Rozell, p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

Why do we have a Congress? We have one because the Constitution says we must. What does Congress do? Well, the members serve as extras in presidential specials. Try to imagine the State of the Union without all those bodies.... Also, they perform small services for constituents. They send them baby books, copies of speeches, appeals for money ... [and] dispense tickets to the galleries, where citizens can watch legislators not legislate.<sup>48</sup>

The press lambasted Congress mercilessly in 1988 after the Presidential Commission of Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Salaries recommended a 51 percent pay raise for senators and representatives (as well as for 2,000 other federal employees). The raise was to take effect automatically in February 1989 unless voted down by both houses. The press vociferously objected, painting a picture that current benefits were "cushy enough to provoke the envy of all but the best compensated private executives."<sup>49</sup> When House Speaker Jim Wright (D-TX) proposed to scale back the raise by 30 percent, the press labeled it a "disingenuous scheme" and called Wright the "wagon boss of the gravy train."<sup>50</sup> While some acknowledged the need for the raise in order to make service in Congress more attractive, most were dismayed by the lack of an open vote on the issue, calling the process "Machiavellian." Public opinion mirrored that of the press, with polls showing 82 percent opposed to the pay hike. Members of Congress were stunned at the "venomous response" of the press and the public.

The 1990s ushered in a new era of cynicism and contempt for Congress. After a brief recession in 1990-1991, the economy surged and living standards increased for almost every American. Yet, Congress seemed to do no right. As Mark Rozell states, "By the early 1990s, Congress bashing had become a national pastime." This wasn't helped by a series of scandals, including "Rubbergate," in which House members were discovered to have bounced numerous checks at the House bank, the "Keating Five," unpaid restaurant tabs, the ethics violations of

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Representative Dan Rostenkowski (D-III), and the sexual harassment charges against Senator Bob Packwood (R-OR). In response to the House banking scandal, a *Washington Post* editorial asked readers:

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to draw no-interest, no-fee loans at will with no repayment schedule? Well, no federal - or state - regulated bank in America would let you get away with that. Not even family or close friends are likely to indulge that fantasy. The one exception is the House of Representatives. Membership there means treating yourself as if you are every inch a king. Subsidized haircuts, fixed traffic tickets, a nice gym and year-round open season to take pot shots at any bureaucrat you want - they have all that plus the keys to the vault.

Not surprisingly, public opinion was in lockstep with the press after two years of unrelenting criticism. When asked during a Harris poll in September 1992 if members of Congress "possessed good moral and ethical standards," only 19 percent of respondents answered "yes."<sup>51</sup> In another poll that year, just 14 percent of respondents approved of Congress' performance.<sup>52</sup> Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* denied the press was to blame for the public's low opinion of the Congress: "Americans did not become more disillusioned because the press distorted the workings of government but because the press exposed the workings of government."<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, some journalists acknowledge culpability on the part of the press. Phil Trounstine of the *Jose Mercury News* observed, "There is a fundamental problem ... that is affecting newsrooms. It's the confusion of cynicism and skepticism. What's happened is, we tend to take this very cynical attitude about politicians at our newspapers,<sup>54</sup> instead of maintaining our historical role, which is to be skeptics."

This cynicism continued unabated until the end of the 103rd Congress in 1994. Editorials and reports characterized the Democratic Congress as having failed for not enacting

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>52</sup> Adam Clymer, "Congress Hunts for Way to Gain a Little Respect," *New York Times*, July 23, 1992, p. A20.

<sup>53</sup> Maureen Dowd, "Raffish and Rowdy," *New York Times*, March 31, 1996, p. E15.

<sup>54</sup> Povich, p. 56.

substantial environmental, health-care, housing, anticrime, education, and ethics legislation."<sup>55</sup>

A *Post* editorial, characterized the 103rd as "perhaps the worst Congress - least effective, most destructive, nastiest - in 50 years.... [in comparison to the adage about watching sausage or laws being made,] we are prepared to say that this adage is grossly unfair to sausage makers."<sup>56</sup>

In September of that year, a study showed that television news stories with a negative slant outpaced positive ones by a two-to-one ratio.<sup>57</sup>

The Republicans took advantage of the public's sour mood and, for the first time in 40 years, took control of the House of Representatives in the 1994 elections. Republicans gained 52 seats in the House and 8 in the Senate ... not a single Republican incumbent lost their seat. The news media compared the GOP takeover to the Boston Tea Party and called the change possibly "the most momentous since the mid-1960s."<sup>58</sup> The change in majority party in the House did not change the tone of the press, however; coverage continued to be negative and cynical. Led by the new Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich (R-GA), the GOP offered the country its "Contract with America." A *Newsweek* column claimed that if the contract were successful, discretionary spending would be over: "That means no FBI, no weather service, no coast guard, no money for subways or highways or schools. The Republicans are dodging this reality.... [T]he GOP wants to cut your taxes and whack welfare. That may be more painful than it sounds."<sup>59</sup>

Coverage of the GOP during the first 100 days of the 104th Congress was unusually heavy, as members of the press tracked the progress of the *Contract with America*. The *Washington Post* provided the most in-depth coverage, featuring the "Contract with America:

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<sup>55</sup> Rozell, p. 103.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Evan Thomas, "Guide to the First 100 Days," & "Goodbye Welfare State," *Newsweek*, November 21, 1994.

Scorecard," tracking action on each item as it wound its way through the legislative process. While successful in passing some provisions, such as streamlined committee operations and fewer committee staff, the GOP was taken to task by the media for not passing the more serious reforms of a balanced-budget amendment and term limits as they had promised to do during the campaign. A study in 1995 by the Center for Media and Public Affairs found that coverage of the GOP Congress between January and March was nearly double that of the same period the previous year. Negative coverage outpaced positive coverage, 70 to 30 percent for both parties. The GOP received five times as much coverage as the Democrats; the House received four times as much as the Senate. Interestingly, Democrats were more likely to be judged on their political conduct and not policy issues, whereas the Republicans were judged on substantive performance or proposals. After a brief "honeymoon" period of positive coverage (73 percent during the first 10 days of January), Speaker Gingrich's positive coverage plummeted to 33 percent. GOP positive coverage moved in tandem, from 53 percent to 31 percent.<sup>60</sup> Some reporters' on-air comments heavily favored Democrats, praising them 71 percent of the time while criticizing Republicans 64 percent of the time.<sup>61</sup>

Newt Gingrich's colorful personality and penchant for strong statements made him the target of intense media coverage, most of it negative. His comments about the House Democratic party leadership frequently landed him on the front page. He once described them as a "cocaine-selling, check-bouncing, big-spending, left-wing petty dictatorship."<sup>62</sup> The greatest damage may have been self-inflicted; after adopting a hard-line stance during budget negotiations, Gingrich admitted that he had been influenced by a perceived slight by the

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<sup>60</sup> "No News is Good Newt," Media Monitor (Center for Media and Public Affairs), Vol IX, Num. 2, Mar/Apr 1995.

<sup>61</sup> "Capitol Hill Follies," Media Monitor (Center for Media and Public Affairs), Vol VIII, Num. 5, Sep/Oct 1994.

<sup>62</sup> Rozell, p. 113.

President aboard Air Force One. *Newsweek* published a political cartoon in its "Perspectives" section depicting Gingrich in diapers crying, "I want to sit up front.... Waaaa!"<sup>63</sup>

Negative coverage continued unabated, although network news program coverage of the next mid-term election in 1998 dropped by an astounding 73 percent. This reduction was due to the overwhelming amount of coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal and the impending impeachment activities. Although the coverage was substantially less, it was fairly balanced, with positive coverage for Democrats and Republicans at 42 and 40 percent, respectively.<sup>64</sup> Further study indicated that coverage of the 2002 midterm election was also down compared to the 1994 elections, by an average of 72 percent. Like the 1998 midterm elections, the public's attention was focused elsewhere. Top news stories included debate over an attack on Iraq (265 stories), followed by the Washington, DC, sniper investigation (163 stories). The 2002 campaign was covered by a woeful 66 stories, with more than a third concerning the death of Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN) and the withdrawal from the New Jersey Senatorial race by Senator Robert Torricelli (D-NJ).<sup>65</sup>

Because the network news programs have a finite amount of time to cover news stories, they look for sound bites during congressional press conferences, floor activity and hearings. Therefore, news coverage of the political process has become increasingly "sound bite-driven." Between 1968 and 1988, network evening news sound bites of presidential candidates shrank from forty-three seconds to nine.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, members often "play to the camera with exaggerated gestures and vitriolic statements while drilling a witness or ranting about an issue on

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<sup>63</sup> Perspectives, *Newsweek*, November 27, 1995, p. 25.

<sup>64</sup> "The Invisible Election," Media Monitor (Center for Media and Public Affairs), Vol XII, Num. 6, Nov/Dec 1998.

<sup>65</sup> "Election Study Finds Absentee Media," press release from the Center for Media and Public Affairs, Nov 1, 2002; These are the latest results from the CMPA ongoing study of political coverage on network TV news. This report is based on all election-related stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts during the eight weeks between September 2nd and October 27th.

<sup>66</sup> Janeway, p. 40.

the floor of their respective chamber. This cycle continually reinforces itself, and, unless they tune in to hours of C-SPAN coverage, the average viewer misses the usually mundane operations of the U.S. Congress and leaves with the impression that Congress is made up of cranky, cantankerous louts looking for a fight. Representative Barney Frank (D-MA) lamented, "I get more attention for three wisecracks and a point of order than I get for a full compromise to a difficult legislative solution."<sup>67</sup>

### Combative politics

Because the media tend to focus on the combative side of politics or on the personal scandals of individual members, the average citizen is painted a bleak picture of our nation's legislature. "Recent coverage of Congress, even by the most prestigious news organizations, smells of tabloid sensationalism. The emphasis on petty scandal and conflict reinforces the worst stereotypes of dishonest, lazy, and vindictive legislators and perpetuates widespread public belief that corruption and malfeasance permeate life on Capitol Hill."<sup>68</sup>

Washington talk shows such as the "Capital Gang," "Crossfire" and "Hardball" thrive on conflict between so-called "experts" representing different ends of the political spectrum. These experts often debate current political issues in a combative, argumentative fashion. The public is left to wonder if this is an accurate representation of how politics works in the nation's capital. One example of this occurred during a broadcast of CNN's "Crossfire" on December 26, 2002. During an interview with outgoing House Majority Leader, Dick Armey (R-TX), host Tucker Carlson couldn't resist:

[S]peaking of accusers, I know you're leaving on a happy note after 18 years. But I did see a statement a couple of months ago, in September, from Congressman Martin Frost and Congresswoman Nita Lowey of New York about you that struck me as uncommonly bitter and cruel. Here it is. `Seldom has the Congress

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<sup>67</sup> Povich, p. 57.

<sup>68</sup> Rozell, p. 5.

become a better institution due to the departure of a member of the House leadership. However, it has become clear that the House would become a more civil and decent institution the day Dick Armey retires.' That's awfully mean. Tell us the story behind that.

But Armey didn't take the bait: "It was an uncharacteristic moment for Martin. He's really not that kind of a vicious person. He was having a bad day. I think he was sort of prodded by a reporter trying to get a story. But Martin's a gentle soul and he's a kind person, and I'm sure he doesn't mean anything quite that mean."

Carlson continued to dig: "What are the personal problems you're alluding to that you think would make him . . ." When Armey claimed he didn't know, Carlson pressed him further: "Is there anyone in Congress you don't respect as a legislator?" When Armey answered in the negative, Carlson gave it one, desperate, last shot: "You can tell us now that you're leaving!" But Armey refused to dish dirt, instead replying, "No. I think members of Congress are a marvelous group of people, and I enjoyed my relationship on both sides. And one of the privileges I had as majority leader was to be able to work with people from both sides of the aisle, to help them get their legislation to the floor. And I did that with a great deal of satisfaction."<sup>69</sup>

A Freedom Forum/Roper poll conducted in 1975 provides an interesting look at how the public, members of Congress, and the Washington press corps view media coverage of Congress. The poll examined three areas: Impact of congressional action on average citizens, political fighting and posturing, and congressional junkets and scandals (see graphic below).

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<sup>69</sup> Excerpted from transcript of CNN *Crossfire*, December 26, 2002, 19:00 ET.

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### How much attention are news media giving to:

		Too much	Too little	About right
• Impact of congressional action				
On average citizens?				
o Public	8%	49%	36%	
o Members of Congress	3%	77%	20%	
o Washington reporters	1%	90%	9%	
Political fighting and posturing?				
o Public	56%	10%	28%	
o Members of Congress	67%	2%	32%	
o Washington reporters	51%	15%	34%	
• Congressional junkets and scandals?				
o Public	50%	22%	20%	
o Members of Congress	49%	8%	44%	
o Washington reporters	9%	33%	58%	

Source: Freedom Forum/Roper poll (Sep-Dec 1995)

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Some critics feel the news media and Congress sometimes get a little too close for comfort; when the line between them blurs, objectivity is called into question. A recent phenomenon is the appearance of news personalities on the Sunday morning talk shows, offering their opinion of current events on Capitol Hill. Andrea Mitchell, foreign affairs correspondent for NBC, offers her personal analysis of political activities while covering the White House. NBC White House correspondent Campbell Brown appears on "The Chris Matthews Show" to give the "inside scoop" on the Administration's reaction to current events. These personal analyses may affect viewers' perception of more objective reporting on nightly newscasts. But as Henry Luce said, "Show me a man who thinks he's objective, and I'll show you a man who's deceiving himself.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Berner.

The cultures of politics and journalism are often intertwined and many times virtually indistinguishable. Many former political operatives find second careers in the media spotlight. George Stephanopoulos once advised his boss, President Bill Clinton, how to handle the media. After leaving the White House, Stephanopoulos became a political analyst for ABC News, analyzing the political moves of his former boss. Now he is host of ABC's Sunday morning talk show "This Week." Other Clinton Administration veterans such as James Carville and Dee Dee Myers make occasional forays into the world of the media. Many former members of Congress choose follow-on careers in front of the camera. Sometimes this transition isn't successful, as in former Congresswoman Susan Molinari's disastrous stint on CBS and former Congressman Joe Scarborough's recent appearance as a talking head on MSNBC.

Perhaps the relationship between the media and Congress can be a little *too* close. In his book, *Sound and Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy*, author Eric Alterman describes an exchange between Congressman Robert Wexler (D-FL) and Congressman Bob Barr (R-GA) during a Judiciary Committee debate on the possible impeachment of President Bill Clinton:

Representative Robert Wexler, defender of President Clinton, was caught in an argument with Representative Bob Barr, an almost hysterical proponent of impeachment. Instead of replying to one of Barr's arguments, however, Wexler instructed his colleagues that he would be saving his arguments for a really important occasion: that evening's episode of Crossfire. "In an effort not to ruin the show tonight, I'm going to wait to respond to Barr's comments earlier until we get on the show.<sup>71</sup>

Of course the relationship between the Congress and the press is a two-way street. The media often gives the minority party the opportunity to take its cause to a forum outside of Congress when the majority party prevents its legislation from being considered in committee or on the floor. Members also use the media to publicize their accomplishments to their

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<sup>71</sup> Eric Alterman, *Sound and Fury: Making of the Punditocracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 262.

constituents. "Legislators have many strategies for winning favorable media coverage from carefully planned events with constituents to staff-produced press releases highlighting recent accomplishments. These efforts have produced more frequent and direct contact between politicians and voters."<sup>72</sup>

The effort to use the media to inform the public has not always been successful, and at times has been directly rebuffed by the industry and its lobby, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). For example, the McCain-Feingold legislation on campaign finance reform contained a provision mandating free airtime for candidates in the period leading up to elections. The broadcast industry strenuously objected, so the provision was removed to facilitate passage. This was not the first time; broadcasters have defeated at least a dozen attempts to mandate free airtime.<sup>73</sup> When President Clinton promised such a provision in his State of the Union speech in 1998, the FCC received implied threats from members of Congress that their budget would be in peril if they followed through. Seventeen Republicans, including the powerful majority whip, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee and the chairman of the Commerce Committee sent a letter to then-FCC chairman William Kennard flexing their proverbial muscle: "Only Congress has the authority to write the laws of our nation, and only Congress has the authority to delegate to the Commission programming obligations by broadcasters." Appropriations Committee Bob Livingston (R-LA) was more direct. He promised a Congressional backlash "[T]he likes of which would not be pleasant to the Federal

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<sup>72</sup> Patrick J. Sellers, "Congress and the News Media: Manipulating the Message of the U.S. Congress," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, Winter 2000.

<sup>73</sup> Neil Hickey, "Why the Broadcasting Industry Gets What it Wants in Washington," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 2002.

Communications Commission under any circumstances." Kennard got the message, and the initiative was promptly dropped.<sup>74</sup>

Fifty of the largest media companies (and their four trade associations) spent \$111.3 million to lobby Congress and the White House between 1996 and 2000. The lobbying influence of the NAB alone is remarkable. The powerful NAB has a budget of \$48 million, spent \$11.14 million on lobbying and made over \$700,000 in political contributions in 2000. They have members "in virtually every congressional district in the nation, and the perceived power of those television and radio stations to shape the news and control how issues that affect their own destiny get covered."<sup>75</sup> In addition to the financial support media companies funnel to members of Congress, they also maintain control of something elected officials covet: airtime.

Representative Billy Tauzin (R-LA) promised the McCain-Feingold legislation giving free airtime to candidates would be "dead on arrival" in the House. Coincidentally, Tauzin, his family and staff have taken 42 free media industry trips worth \$77,389 between 1997-2000.<sup>76</sup> But Tauzin is not alone. Between 1997 and 2000, media companies spent over \$450,000 on trips for 118 members of Congress and their staff. Perhaps less well known to the public is that media companies don't just target Congress. In fact, between 1995 and 2000, FCC employees went on over 1,450 all-expense paid trips costing media companies over \$1.5 million. Even less well known is the fact that the President and CEO of the NAB, Eddie Fritts was a college classmate of Senator Trent Lott, the recently-deposed Senate majority leader. And, until recently, one of the registered lobbyists at the NAB was none other than Billy Tauzin's daughter, Kimberly.<sup>77</sup> In his

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<sup>74</sup> Excerpted from comments by Charles Lewis, executive director of the Center for Public Integrity, during the Forum on Media Ownership at the Kernochan Center for Law, Media and the Arts at the Columbia University School of Law, January 16, 2003.

<sup>75</sup> Neil Hickey, "Why the Broadcasting Industry Gets What it Wants in Washington," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 2002.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Charles Lewis comments.

comments at the Columbia University School of Law's "Forum on Media Ownership" in January 2003, Charles Lewis of the Center for Public Integrity, surmised, "A regulated industry has a stranglehold over the regulator and its Congressional overseers. Not a new story in Washington, I'm afraid, but one of the reasons Americans frequently distrust government, its officials and its policies."<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps a more insidious influence wielded by the news media is how much coverage they give to a candidate, a member of Congress or an issue. Gene Kimmelman, co-director of Consumer Union's Washington office put it more succinctly: "[The broadcasting industry] controls the imagery of what people learn about public officials. They can show a candidate picking his nose, his hair blowing the wrong way, making a funny face or a silly comment. They can make you look like a fool or a brilliant politician." Moreover, politicians and their issues can simply be downplayed or not covered at all. In a study titled, "Fear & Favor 2000: How Power Shapes the News," the organization Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) details how the publisher of the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, Richard Mellon Scaife, a longtime conservative activist,

Ordered all photographs and prominent mentions of Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore removed from the front page of the paper. As a result, the paper's pre-election Sunday edition had a front page featuring George W. Bush in every campaign-related headline and photograph. A story about a Gore rally held in Pittsburgh, originally slated to run alongside a Bush piece on the front page, was moved to the inside of the paper.

The managing editor of the paper attempted to dissuade the publisher, but was unsuccessful.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> "Fear and Favor 2000: How Power Shapes the News," Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, p.

The media paints a bleak, cynical, and overall negative picture of the United States Congress. Studies show the public gets much of its information from the media; therefore, deducing their opinions of Congress are shaped by press coverage is reasonable. Former Senator Alan Simpson puts it more bluntly:

It is the media that gorges itself on conflict, confusion and controversy, then regurgitates that blathering bile each and every day into Americans' homes. It lands with a plop on the doorstep in the morning or, more likely, casts gloomy, silvery shadows from the television set at night. The response from Joe Citizen is generally one of pure disgust with politics, government, the process of legislating - and the media.<sup>80</sup>

The public often confuses the press with the politicians and isn't sure whom to blame for the proliferation of cynicism and negativity that pervades our culture. Reporters overwhelmingly fault the Congress, while most legislators feel both institutions are equally guilty. The finger pointing will no doubt continue:

#### **Who is more to blame for the public's loss of respect for Congress?**

	Responses by members of Congress	Responses by Washington reporters
News Media	24%	2%
Members of Congress	19%	73%
Both equally to blame	55%	21%

Source: Freedom Forum/Roper poll (Sep-Dec 1995)

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<sup>80</sup> Senator Simpson, as quoted in Povich, *Partners & Adversaries: The Contentious Connection Between Congress and the Media*, p. 67.

## THE PUBLIC AND THE MEDIA

*"Those who follow printing are scarce able to do anything which shall not probably give offense to some and perhaps to many."*

**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**

During the twentieth century, America's appetite for news waned. Readership of newspapers declined steadily, while television news viewership followed suit. One reason the public watches less political news is that news organizations air less of it. In 2000, the three largest broadcast stations, ABC, CBS, and NBC, aired 28 percent less overall campaign coverage, and coverage of the Democratic and Republican conventions was down by two-thirds since 1968; Presidential sound bites went from 43 seconds to 7.8 seconds during the same period.<sup>81</sup>

Not only is American consumption of news in a general decline, trust in the press is falling. In their 1997 study of the press, Joseph Capella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson opined this "may be due [in part] to the media's own sowing of the seed of public distrust. In other words, the elevation of public distrust of political institutions and processes may have attached itself to the bearers of information about those institutions - the news media themselves."<sup>82</sup> The public appears to question the fairness, accuracy and morality of the press. Gallup polls from May 1972 through December 1998 show that public confidence in the media to report the news "fully, accurately and fairly" decreased from 70 percent to 55 percent. A Pew survey found that roughly two-thirds of the public expresses doubts about fairness of the news media: 67 percent believed the news media tends to favor one side on social and political issues.<sup>83</sup> Another Pew poll found that 59 percent of respondents felt that news editors care more about the opinions of

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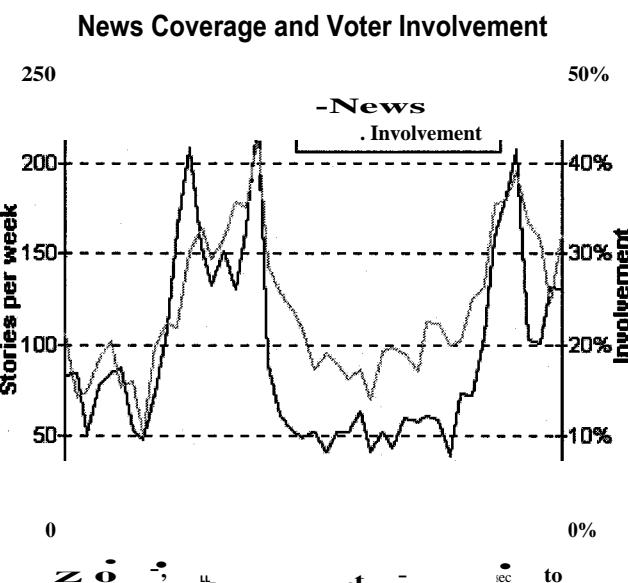
<sup>81</sup> "Fear and Favor 2000."

<sup>82</sup> Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, , *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Bennett, Stephen, *et al.*, "Assessing American's Opinions About the News Media's Fairness in 1996 and 1998," *Political Communication*, 18: 163-182, 2001

political insiders than those of viewers when considering what to cover during an election.<sup>14</sup> The terrorist attacks of September 11th provided a short-term boost in the public's faith in the news media, but since then the numbers have returned to their previous lows.

Studies show the majority of Americans form their political opinions based on what they see in the media. The public often judges how important an issue is by how much coverage it receives. In 2000, a poll conducted by the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy (Harvard University Kennedy School of Government) found a high correlation between media coverage of campaigns and public involvement in the political process (Figure 1).<sup>85</sup> Tami Buhr, research coordinator for the Shorenstein Center said, "We know from past research that a more involved public is likely to become a more informed and participatory public."<sup>86</sup>



**Figure 1, 2000 News coverage and Voter Involvement**

<sup>84</sup> Andrew Kohut, "Why Voters Avoid the Story," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1999.

<sup>85</sup> According to the Shorenstein Center's press release, "The voter involvement index is calculated by averaging the responses to four questions - whether people say they are currently paying close attention to the campaign, whether they are thinking about the campaign, talking about it, and following it in the news."

<sup>86</sup> "News Coverage Propels Election Interest," press release, Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, September 20, 2000, obtained from URL: <http://www.vanishingvoter.org/releases/09-20-00.shtml>.

But the press does more than make the public aware of political issues. "The idea of agenda-setting asserts that the priorities of the press to some degree *become* [italics added] the priorities of the public. What the press emphasizes is in turn emphasized privately and publicly by the audiences of the press."<sup>87</sup> In a study of 1968's presidential election, Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs attempted to verify the agenda-setting role of the news media.

Among undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina there were substantial correlations between the political issues emphasized in the news media and what the voters regarded as the key issues in that election. The voters' beliefs about what were the major issues facing the country reflected the composite of the press coverage, even though the three presidential contenders in 1968 placed widely divergent emphasis on the issues. \$

The public's view on the credibility of broadcast news organizations has changed little in the past two years. The cable news channels appear to surpass the network news in terms of credibility: 37 percent of Americans surveyed said they believe "all or most of what they hear on CNN," whereas only 25 percent said the same about the networks news shows. Paradoxically, fully one-third of those surveyed stated they believe all or most of what the anchors of those network news shows say.

Another Pew study found partisan differences in the way the broadcast news media is perceived. With the exception of their faith in Fox News Channel, Republicans were more skeptical of the media's credibility than were Democrats.<sup>89</sup>

In the realm of print media, the Pew study found that the *Wall Street Journal* received the highest credibility rating, with 33 percent, far ahead of local papers (21 percent) and *USA Today* (19 percent). *U.S. News & World Report* led the news magazine category, with 26 percent of

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<sup>87</sup> Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs, *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (St Paul: West Publishing Company, 1977), p. 6.

*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> "News Media's Improved Image Proves Short-Lived," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, August 4, 2002

those surveyed saying they believe everything they read in the magazine. *Time* and *Newsweek*<sup>90</sup> lagged behind, with 23 percent and 20 percent, respectively.

A 1993 *Los Angeles Times* poll found that the primary reason the public had less confidence in the media was its sensationalistic coverage. Interestingly, "the severity of a politician's 'crime' proves to be the determining factor in shaping public assessments of the media's credibility." In other words, when a politician is found to have committed an act that is "palpable, certain, and ... against the community," the public sees the media as believable. On the other hand, if the public perceives the act as "politics as usual," or is based on personal conduct (or unproven), the media loses credibility.<sup>91</sup>

The public often sends mixed signals to the media on what it wants to see and hear. In 1998, surveys showed the public was tiring of press coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, feeling it was salacious and excessive. However, an ABC broadcast of Barbara Walter's interview with Lewinsky drew the biggest audience ever for a prime time news show: 49 million.<sup>92</sup>

An exception to the trend is public approval of the news media's role as a watchdog of society. A summer 2002 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 59 percent of respondents believe "press scrutiny of political leaders keeps them from doing things they should not.... And a 49 percent plurality thinks press criticism of the military keeps the armed forces prepared."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Bennett, *et al.*, p. 66.

<sup>92</sup> Downie and Kaiser, p. 28.

<sup>93</sup> "News Media's Improved Image Proves Short-Lived," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, August 4, 2002

## THE PUBLIC AND CONGRESS

*"The death of democracy is not likely to be from an assassination or from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference and undernourishment.*

ROBERT HUTCHINS

The public appears to hold little affection for the system of checks and balances that inherently lead to gridlock and compromise. The Center for the Study of Congress at Duke University School of Law held a roundtable discussion in September 1997 and asked the question, "Is Congress Failing or is it Just Misunderstood?" The Center proposed five possible causes for the low opinion the public holds for the Congress:<sup>94</sup>

- Congressional results
- Congressional procedures
- The behavior and apparent priorities of members
- Campaigning
- Media reporting on the institution and its members

Cynicism pervades the relationship between Congress and the American public. In a July, 1994 column, *Washington Post* columnist David Broder wrote, "Cynicism is epidemic right now ... It saps people's confidence in politics and public officials, and it erodes both the standing and the standards of journalism. If the assumption is that nothing is on the level, nothing is what it seems, then citizenship becomes a game for fools and there is no point in trying to stay informed."<sup>95</sup> Members are acutely aware of their standing with the public. "Please don't tell my mother I'm a politician," said then-Representative Pat Schroeder in 1992, with tongue firmly in cheek, "She thinks I'm a prostitute."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> "Is Congress Failing or is it Just Misunderstood?" A Roundtable Discussion, Sponsored by the Center for the Study of Congress, Duke University School of Law, September 13, 1997.

<sup>95</sup> David Broder, as quoted in Cappella and Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*, p. 17.

<sup>96</sup> Rep. Schroeder appearing on CNN's "Newsmaker Sunday, April 12, 1992, as quoted in Povich, *Partners & Adversaries: The Contentious Connection Between Congress and the Media.*"

Polls consistently reflect the public's distrust and cynicism when it came to Congress. In nineteen polls over a five-year period, an average of 62 percent of those surveyed expressed disapproval of the job Congress was doing.<sup>97</sup> A 1997 study on the public opinion of government asked respondents, "how much confidence do you have that members of the United States Congress serve the interests of *all* the people, not just the interests of those with special influence?" Only 32 percent answered a "great deal" or a "fair amount," while 58 percent responded "not very much" or "none at all."<sup>98</sup> In a 2000 Shorenstein Center poll, 87 percent of respondents believed that "most politicians are willing to say whatever it takes to get themselves elected."<sup>99</sup> Other polls are more specific: in a Pew Research Center study released in the summer of 2002, only nine percent of those polled believed all or most of what Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle said, and nearly 25 percent said they "believe almost nothing" of what he said.<sup>100</sup> "This country's always been skeptical of power and has always cherished the right to beat up its leaders, including Washington, said former House Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1996. "The period from 1940 to 1965 was one of the most ordered periods in American history. We are now back in the more normally American style, which is high levels of chaos with brief moments of coherence."<sup>101</sup> Former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell put it another way:<sup>102</sup> "There never was a time when Congress was popular. It's a case of relative displeasure."

Politicians themselves contribute to low opinion by distancing themselves from "the politicians inside the beltway" when running for office. While trying to score political points,

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<sup>97</sup> Povich, *The Contentious Connection*, p. 18.

<sup>98</sup> Albert Cantril and Susan Davis Cantril, *Reading Mixed Signals: Ambivalence in American Public Opinion about Government*, (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1999) pp. 30-32.

<sup>99</sup> "Americans 'Disgusted' with Politics," -Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 13, 2000.

<sup>100</sup> "News Media's Improved Image Proves Short-Lived."

<sup>101</sup> Newt Gingrich, as quoted in *Is Congress Failing, or is it Just Misunderstood? A Roundtable Discussion* sponsored by the Duke University School of Law, September 13, 1997, p. 4-5.

<sup>102</sup> Povich, Elaine, *Partners & Adversaries*, p. 18.

members may make disparaging remarks about the institution, giving the public the impression that all Congress does is debate and grandstand, when in fact most members are hard-working, dedicated public servants. "So many members don't see themselves as part of the institution," observed David Broder. "They use the institution for their own purpose, but they feel free to bash the hell out of it."<sup>103</sup>

Paradoxically, Americans draw a distinction between "members of Congress" and "their members of congress," who get much higher approval ratings. A 1997 poll found that 60 percent of respondents wanted to see their own member of Congress reelected, compared to only 17 percent who did not.<sup>104</sup> This leads to an astounding reelection rate for incumbents: in 2000, 98.5 percent of incumbents in the House were reelected, most with margins of 70 percent or more. In fact, the U.S. House of Representatives has the lowest turnover rate of all freely-elected legislatures in the world.<sup>105</sup>

"If they persist, negative attitudes will undermine the legitimacy of the institution in the eyes of the citizenry. Public expectations of Congress will be lowered; public acceptance of legislative actions will weaken; public demand for executive leadership and action will grow; ambitious and talented individuals will leave Congress and/or seek public careers elsewhere."<sup>lob</sup>

Conversely, what do members of Congress think of the voting public? Not much, apparently. Only 31 percent of members of Congress polled felt that Americans "knew enough about issues to make wise decisions." Forty-seven percent felt they did not. Over half felt that "public distrust affects the policy decisions of their colleagues a great deal or fair amount."

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>104</sup> "Americans Unmoved by Washington's Big Story," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, April 11, 1997.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas Patterson, "Where Have all the Voters Gone?" *Christian Science Monitor*, November 4, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>106</sup> chard Fenno, as quoted in *Is Congress Failing, or is it Just Misunderstood?* A Roundtable Discussion sponsored by the Duke University School of Law, September 13, 1997, p. 5.

Finally, while 22 percent of members polled felt the reason for public distrust was the way government operated, fully 77 percent felt negative coverage by the media was the main culprit.<sup><sup>107</sup></sup>

Does the public's low opinion of Congress extend to other government institutions?

Interestingly, the public has considerably higher opinions of executive branch agencies and their respective state legislatures. The percentage of respondents answering they had a "great deal" or a "fair amount" of confidence in executive agencies, the Congress and their state legislature was 55 percent, 35 percent and 50 percent, respectively. Conversely, a percentage of those answering "Not very much" or "none at all" was 37 percent, 63 percent and 46 percent, respectively.<sup><sup>108</sup></sup> Similarly, Americans appear to have higher confidence in federal employees than they do elected officials.

The writers from "Monty Python's Flying Circus" recognize the public's disaffection with elected officials in a humorous disclaimer:

We would like to apologize for the way in which politicians are represented in this program. It was never our intention to imply that politicians are weak-kneed political time-servers who are concerned more with their personal vendettas and private power struggles than with the problems of government. Nor to suggest at any point that they sacrifice their credibility by denying free debate on vital matters, in the mistaken impression that party unity comes before the well-being of the people they supposedly represent. Nor to imply at any stage that they are squabbling little toadies without an ounce of concern for the vital social problems of today. Nor indeed do we intend that the viewers should consider them as crabby, ulcerous little self-seeking vermin with furry legs and an excessive addiction to alcohol and certain explicit sexual practices that some people might find offensive. We are sorry if this impression has come across.

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<sup>107</sup> "Washington Leaders Wary of Public Opinion," Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, April 17, 1998.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

## APATHY OF THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE

*"The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all."*

JOHN F. KENNEDY, JR.

No discussion about the relationship between the public and Congress would be complete without a brief look at the apathy of the American electorate. When it's business as usual on the political scene, the American public is remarkably fickle or downright disengaged. When asked during a Roper public opinion poll in 1995, 47 percent of respondents didn't know the names of their U.S. senators; 60% didn't know their representative; 51 percent didn't know the speaker of the House; and 62 percent could not name the Senate majority leader.<sup>109</sup> A 2000 poll found that 71 percent of respondents found "Politics in America [generally] disgusting."<sup>110</sup>

The public has a selective memory concerning media coverage of politics, more likely to remember sensationalized images than factual commentary. For example, during the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns, television correspondents aired segments criticizing the Reagan and Bush campaigns for being light on substance, appearing before cheering crowds waving flags and releasing balloons. But when the public viewed the stories, polls found that most viewers retained the vision of happy, cheering crowds and not the critical commentary that came with it."<sup>111</sup>

Over the years, increasing apathy has led to decreasing voter turnout. In 1960, voter turnout was at 63 percent; by 2000 it had sunk to 51.3 percent.

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<sup>109</sup> Cheryl Arvidson, "Partners and Adversaries: Congress and the Media Get a Blueprint to Build a More Informed Citizenry," *American Journalism Review*, Vol. 18, Issue 4, May 1996, p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> "Americans 'Disgusted' with Politics," Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 13, 2000.

<sup>111</sup> Stephen Ansolabehere, Roy Behr, and Shanto Iyengar, *The Media Game, American Politics in the Television Age*, (NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1993), p. 238.

## National Voter Turnout in Federal Elections: 1960-2000

Year	Turnout of voting-age population
2000	51.3%
1998	36.4
1996	49.1
1994	38.8
1992	55.1
1990	36.5
1988	50.1
1986	36.4
1984	53.1
1982	39.8
1980	52.6
1978	37.2
1976	53.6
1974	38.2
1972	55.2
1970	46.6
1968	60.8
1966	48.4
1964	61.9
1962	47.3
1960	61

Source: Federal Election Commission

Why aren't Americans voting? In a tongue-in-cheek article on Salon.com, author Christopher Shea claimed that "Americans have long found politics about as exciting as a PBS documentary on the great crested grebe - and they pay a corresponding amount of attention to it."<sup>112</sup> In a more serious work, Thomas E. Patterson posits several reasons for increased voter apathy and the consequent decline in voter turnout: demographic changes in our society, both generational and racial; the weakening of political parties as a means of defining one's political beliefs; the public disdain for negative politics; media coverage of the political process that is more interpretive than descriptive and coverage that tends to be "skeptical, negative, and

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Shea, "Is Voter Ignorance Killing Democracy?" Salon.com, retrieved from URL: <http://www.salon.com/books/it/1999/11/22/voter>.

strategic"; a long campaign cycle that quickly loses the public's attention; and policies that discourage people from voting by closing registration two or more weeks before Election Day (in the 2000 election, states allowing Election-Day registration had 15 percent higher voter participation).<sup>113</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The relationships among the public, the media and the Congress are more complex than ever, and they are fraught with contradictions. The public sees Congress as a collection of combative louts, yet reelect incumbents at an astounding rate. They see the press focusing too much on controversy and scandal, yet flock to their televisions to watch stories covering scandals on Capitol Hill. Members of Congress share a symbiotic, sometimes incestuous and often codependent relationship with the news media. They express great contempt for the press, yet use the media at the first opportunity to publicize their agenda and communicate with their constituents. They complain of the combative nature of press coverage and then become co-hosts of rambunctious political talk shows upon retirement. These contradictions make it nearly impossible to determine where the heart of the problem lies. Each player blames the others for the high level of cynicism that exists today. But within these contradictions lies a necessary codependency. As is often the case, one can't survive without the other. Without the free speech of the press, the freed speech of our society, or the frustrations arising from our bicameral legislature, our system of government would be in peril. Some would say the combative nature of the relationships is the American way.

This paper contends that the media is the prism through which the public forms its opinion of Congress. Recent decades have seen enormous change within the media, from a

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty*, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

change in the business model to significant advances in technology. Furthermore, the slow, deliberative culture of lawmaking is diametrically opposed to the sound bite culture of the news media. This clash of cultures often causes coverage of the political process to go from substantive to sensational. Although the public appears to be engrossed by scandalous and celebrity-driven news, they become increasingly alienated from the legislative process, a process that depends on an informed electorate to remain true to the ideals of the Founding Fathers.

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